

An ominous new world: dystopia or the ways of human imperfection

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In memory of my Professor

Fernando de Mello Moser dedicated one chapter of his book *Tomás More e os Caminhos da Perfeição Humana* [*Thomas More and the Ways Towards Human Perfection*] (1982) to the issue concerning the ways English Renaissance writers envisaged for humankind as whole, or for the English people only, to achieve perfection. He called it “The Island and the Vision” in an obvious anticipation of his approach to More’s *Utopia*, and to other works which shared More’s visionary gift for putting forward fairer and happier societies in order to pave the way towards future and less imperfect generations. The new literary genre named after More’s picture of an imaginary reflection of England framed by a wise set of laws and a humanistic education for all its inhabitants became an inspirational “brave new world” where men and women could pursue their ethical, intellectual, political, and spiritual path aiming for a higher level of individual and collective existence.

This path towards perfection presented by More in his *Utopia* was set up on his firm belief in humankind’s dignity, a belief he shared with other contemporaneous humanists, as is the case in Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), or in Thomas Hoby’s translation

of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1561), as Moser (53) points out. However, in the early sixteenth century, English Renaissance was still in progress; the medieval world vision lingered on in many aspects, the new aesthetics were being experimented, albeit with a foreign flavour, and science was vying with magic for its recognition as the way to reach true knowledge. C. S. Lewis, in his essay "New Learning, New Ignorance" (1954) contrasts the transitional and restless, tentative frame of mind of the times in search of new answers with the slower, newer artistic and literary production – the "Drab period". From an anthropomorphic perspective, man's newly found responsibility in relation to his own fate also raised doubts in some quarters about his ethical fortitude. So, not everyone considered human dignity a reliable asset: Erasmus laughed at it in his famous work, *The Praise of Folie*, he dedicated to his friend Thomas More; Montaigne (441) doubted it in his *Essais*, in "Apologie de Raimond Sebond":

Il en faut faire de mesme, et accompagner nostre foy de toute la raison qui est en nous, mais tousjours avec cette reservation de n'estimer pas que ce soit de nous qu'elle dépende, ny que nos efforts et argumens puissent atteindre à une si supernaturelle et divine science. Si elle n'entre chez nous par une infusion extraordinaire; si elle y entre non seulement par discours, mais encore par moyens humains, elle n'y est pas en sa dignité ny en sa splendeur. Et certes je crain pourtant que nous ne la jouyssions que par cette voye. Si nous tenions à Dieu par l'entremise d'une foy vive; si nous tenions à Dieu par luy, non par nous; si nous avions un pied et un fondement divin, les occasions humaines n'auroient pas le pouvoir de nous esbranler, comme elles ont; nostre fort ne seroit pas pour se rendre à une si foible batterie; l'amour de la nouvelleté, la contraincte des Princes, la bonne [Image 0186] fortune d'un party, le changement temeraire et fortuite de nos opinions n'auroient pas la force de secouer et alterer nostre croiance; nous ne la lairriions pas troubler à la mercy d'un nouvel argument et à la persuasion, non pas de toute la Rhetorique qui fust onques; nous soutienderions ces flots d'une fermeté inflexible et immobile.

Moser (52-53) draws our attention to the bifocal vision conveyed by Sir John Davies in his poem *Nosce te Ipsum*, where man is depicted as made in God's image, but, simultaneously, a corrupted material creature. He attributes this pessimistic appreciation to the Calvinistic

belief that humankind's salvation depended only on God's benevolent will, men being impotent to change their eternal fate through their good deeds.

Nonetheless, Moser's emphasis is definitely on the positive image of man as is exemplified by More and his *Utopia*, a project to lead men in the path of perfection, as synonymous with happiness. He further acknowledges that, though in a different perspective, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* also pursues this same goal: a perfecting process to ensure human beings may live a happy or happier life. The difference between these two utopias lies on the very notion of happiness: the former is focused on a spiritual perspective, aiming at a blissful eternal life in the divine realm, while the latter is homed in an earthly joyful life; the former depends on God's judgment and mercy, the latter on men's ability to discover, through science, how to take advantage of the material world around him to be healthier and wealthier, indeed to live longer and looking more beautiful, in more pleasant and easier conditions. Briefly, Bacon did not just put the new science in the spotlight, but he made the apology of men's ability to know and, thus, dominate Nature, whereas More kept his faith in a transcendental ultimate bliss.

Again, as Moser (60) also points out, both works are concerned with society and its improvement and eventual perfecting possibilities, and in his opinion *Utopia* stresses the binomial individual/society, because, contrary to Bacon's unfinished work, More's comprehends every aspect of human life, its routines and higher aspirations and targets. Thus, according to More's holistic view, humankind's earthly journey, albeit transitional, prepares humankind to the actually important real life – *i.e.* eternal life.

Actually, with the passing of time and the emergence of fragmentary visions of the world opposing the medieval and Renaissance *Weltanschauung*, brought about by numerous scientific discoveries and the consequent multiplication of specific fields of knowledge, the certainty of a unique model of the perfect society was bound to be lost. In its stead, distinct proposals to improve society turned up either defending or attacking current ideologies. Isaiah Berlin (37) in his essay "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West" considers Herder to

be the first philosopher and historian to declare, in an articulated way, that values are not universal: “[...] every human society, every people, indeed every age and civilization, possess its own unique ideals, standards, way of living and thought and action”. This cultural perspective, denying the prevalence of immutable, universal rules or criteria of judgment allows each culture or nation to find their own solutions in order to ensure the possible happiest and fairest life for their people.

Marxism, or socialism in its several facets seem to have offered the last universal project for universal happiness. William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) illustrated this aim, and Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope*, published in the fifties, tried to explain utopia as the universal project to achieve the perfect society: in his view, utopia is but a stage in the chain of historical events, an element that will help make things come true. After a long period of conflicts, a timeless, static, serene collective way of live will come into being.

The alternative to the socialist solution appears to be chaotic: the romantic notion of individualism, formerly associated with ideals of freedom for each man and independence for each and every nation – illustrated both by the American and French Revolutions –, led up later to feelings ranging from dissatisfaction to fear of an impending doom.

History seems to confirm this almost apocalyptical view. Whereas with the breaking out of the two World Wars and the authoritarian regimes which took over in the thirties in several European countries, v. g. Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Salazar’s and Franco’s dictatorships in the Iberian Peninsula, Mussolini’s fascism in Italy and Hitler’s Nazism in Germany, these great unitary visions of the perfect society started declining eventually making room for prophetic warnings of “change and decay”. Faria (362-363), in “Fernando de Mello Moser: A Cultura e os Caminhos da Perfeição” [The Culture and the Ways of Perfection], regards the mid-twentieth century as the moment when the signs of what she designates as “maladjustments” become more evident. Bearing on Thompson’s notion of impossible “Natopolitism”, that is, the denial of the existence of a free world where divergent theories coexist, everything would just consist in a cluster of mere opinions with no intellectual or social responsibilities. That would,

indeed, strike the definite blow on utopian writing: “Apatia, desencantamento, alienação tornaram-se as palavras chave da cultura da segunda metade do século XX” (363).¹

Hence the rise of dystopian fiction, or anti-utopia as Berlin would rather call them, as is the case with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948). The obvious irony of Huxley’s title links these two moments in humankind’s world vision, the optimistic, constructive attitude of the past, and the warning, often hopeless and powerless narrative of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Undoubtedly the darker side of science had shown itself in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings making Bertrand Russell appeal to men’s ethics so as to avoid such horror should occur again. Also, the chemical experiments aiming at mental and/or genetic manipulation were gaining momentum, namely, the mustard gas used in World War I and the “truth drugs” that became popular among the intelligentsia of the Western and Eastern blocks during the Cold War, much new weaponry and many surveillance devices were invented. Huxley foresaw some of these dangerous discoveries and their impact on the possibility of letting a free society prevail.

The impending question of individualism or socialism continues to defy both ideologists and utopia writers, given that there seems to be no viable convergence between the individual pursuit of happiness and the good of the community. In extreme circumstances at least, these premises seem to confront each other, discarding both the Christian commandment “Love thy neighbour” and the Marxist ideal of the altruistic “New Man”.

Huxley feared the collective uniform apathy and alienation could spring from the growing consumerism of an industrialised world eager to find new markets or expand old ones in order to sell more and more goods and so increase the producers’ profits in like manner. He saw in American society, and particularly in the state of California, the symbol of this way of living. The artificiality of urban spaces, the production of goods in assembly lines, dehumanising the workers and the human familial and affective relationships, the massification of work, entertainment or any other daily routine, all contributed to an unauthentic existence, a sort of cloning of real life devoid of true feelings

and emotions or intellectual curiosity – in fact, a world of childish “make believe”. Even the conquered political stability, the advances in medical science, in building and sanitary techniques, or the improvements in the means of transport and all other possible handy gadgets invented to make life more pleasant seem a very poor reason to discard higher, more demanding ideals. Hedonism in Huxley’s depiction of his new world is, after all, not synonymous with happiness.

In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, collectivism is achieved, not by genetic manipulation or drugs administration, but through strict surveillance – “Big Brother is watching you” – using a kind of interactive screen (unknown and undiscovered at the time of the writing of the work), inducing coercive measures, such as physical and mental torture, in order to suppress any glimpse of individual opinion or curiosity, individualism being the great corrosive factor that might dare to attempt against the political *statu quo*. In spite of Thompson disbelief in the strength of opinions, Orwell showed how much they were feared in dictatorial regimes, both left or right wing ones. In this society, even political stability seems precarious, since it is only kept by the use of force and does not expand beyond the country’s boundaries. In fact, there is always a war being waged to keep internal cohesion by creating a safe way to vent people’s frustrations while focusing on a somewhat archetypal enemy.

When one compares the mid-twentieth century with the Renaissance period, it is clear that in both cases Europe and the world in general were changing in a drastic way. On the one hand, the paradigmatic revolution from geocentrism to heliocentrism, the new geographies registered by the Discoveries, the religious Schism between Roman Catholicism and Christian Protestantism, and the aesthetic revolution leading from medieval Gothic to Classicism, all put together caused such a commotion in the lives of common men and nations that it would be euphemistic to call it a troubled period. On the other hand, twentieth-century political history, embracing not only the great international conflicts, but also the confrontations about political rights for workers or women, the social struggles concerning health and educational issues either for children or for whole populations, the upsurge of racial confrontations and, in the early years

of the twenty-first century, terrorism are ingredients making up for a picture of vibrating but unquiet times.

The shift from an optimistic, constructive attitude, which reached its climax during the Enlightenment, is very clearly stated by Kant (1) in his famous manifesto *What is the Enlightenment?* [Was ist die Aufklärung?]:

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! "Have courage to use your own reason!"

This was the era of a solid modernity, to use Zygmunt Bauman's words, when the educated men of the times believed the mysteries of the universe could be unveiled through their study and their recently found methods: the Cartesian rationalism, combined with the rigour of mathematic calculus and experimentalism were the tools that were to enable humankind's rule over Nature, as well as over human nature itself.

However, over the last two centuries, and especially from the twentieth-century on, an end was finally put to these long-lasting certainties. Despite the many advances in different scientific fields and the several social and political measures to make life more enjoyable, dissatisfaction (in various degrees) does prevail. The dystopian scenarios of oppression, enslavement, annihilation of the most humane features presented by Huxley and Orwell coincide in a portrait of an ominous world, deprived of the courage or braveness to overcome it. Bauman (5-6) believes "the task of constructing a new and better order to replace the old and defective one is not presently on the agenda of the realm where political action is supposed to reside". If so, this may be the last motive to be borne in on earth so as to consider the current world an ominous place to live. When the previously solid factors seem to melt into a relativistic perspective and even scientific axioms (the most recent creed) such as time and space become relative, everything is being constantly reclassified and shaped as is the case with liquids.

Bauman's notion of contemporary fluidity, both in an ideal and material perspective, at individual and collective levels, is unfolded by the philosopher Steven Luke in his disquieting narrative, *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat*. By playing with his main character's homonym, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, marquis Condorcet, an important figure of the French Enlightenment with important works on political philosophy, this novel of ideas evolves in the form of a quest: Professor Caritat is compelled to travel around the world in order to discover the best political system for people to live in with all the conditions required so one may be happy. Unfortunately, all the societies he calls upon, in spite of their near-perfection at first sight, quickly show their flaws. We must then draw the conclusion that every political solution meets its opposition; every system has its enemies and its victims. Certainties and principles melt away in this fluidity which, nonetheless, does not suffice to justify humanity's apparent abdication of being accountable for its own fate.

Note

- 1 Apathy, disenchantment, alienation became key words of the culture of the second half of the twenty century (translation mine).